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ABSTRACT

During the 1979-80 academic year, a study was conducted to determine the beliefs and attitudes held by individuals in four groups (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) directly associated with the student activity program in a small Mississippi high school using ethnographic techniques. Ethnographic techniques involve the direct observation of human activity and interaction in an ongoing and naturalistic fashion. During the study, advantages and disadvantages in using ethnographic method were found. Major advantages included sufficient on-site time for a depth of understanding allowing the researcher time to review and analyze information which seemed enigmatic on the surface; attendance at almost all activities provided first-hand information and gradually made the investigator an accepted entity in the school; and the method did not disrupt the ongoing routine of the school. Disadvantages to ethnography were extensive time spent away from job and family; more time was needed to complete the study than was planned; problems in scheduling interviews and observing events; extensive recording of events and interviews; and hand-written records of interviews and observations imposed limitations on amount and quality of material recorded. (ERB)

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ETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH
IN STUDENT ACTIVITIES AT
SMALL SCHOOLS

by

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ETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH IN STUDENT ACTIVITIES AT SMALL SCHOOLS

Introduction

A growing trend in educational research has been the use of ethnographic techniques to examine various areas of education. This method involves the direct observation of human activity and interaction in an ongoing and naturalistic fashion.¹ In 1979 and 1980 ethnographic techniques were used in a study on student activities. This study was conducted to determine the beliefs and attitudes held by individuals in four groups (students, parents, teachers and administrators) directly associated with the student activity program in a small Mississippi high school.

In approaching this study, the investigator found no evidence that would indicate that previous attempts had been made at using an ethnographic approach in conducting research on student activities. For this reason, the investigator was left to his own devices in adapting the techniques of ethnography to the collection of data on student activities.

In carrying out this study, the investigator learned a great deal about the advantages and disadvantages of the research methods he chose. Following a brief description of the study and its results, some of the advantages and disadvantages of the ethnographic techniques used in this study are examined below. Changes which would be made if a similar study were attempted in the future are also described.

Student Activities in a Small School

Throughout the 1979-80 academic year this investigator spent approximately 83 days at Xenon High School,² a small school graduating from 80 to 100 students each year. During this period he achieved a considerable degree of familiarity

with the school in general and the student activity program in particular. The length of the data-collection period afforded the investigator the time and opportunity to observe and record what he perceived to be occurring in student activities and subsequently to compare those observations with the perceptions of students, teachers parents and administrators.

Results of the study indicated that the participation rate for student activities at Xenon High School was lower than might have been expected in a small school.³ Nevertheless, each of the four groups interviewed agreed that student activities were an important part of the overall school program. Several conditions among non-participants at Xenon High School, however, were found to be factors in students' decision not to participate in school activities. The three most prevalent factors were race, socio-economic status and the long range consequences of homogeneous grouping.⁴

Advantages of the Ethnographic Method for Student Activities Research

The ethnographic method offers numerous advantages in conducting research on student activities. One of these is the depth of understanding achieved through this method.

Because the researcher was on site at Xenon High School long enough to achieve considerable degree of familiarity with the school, he had an opportunity to place isolated incidents in proper perspective and to gain insight into subtle patterns and underlying currents which might not have been achieved through other research methods. The ethnographic method afforded the luxury of time to review, analyze and reinvestigate new and puzzling bits of information.

Another advantage inherent in the ethnographic method lay in the opportunities it provided for first-hand, on-site observation of a variety of student activities in their normal rhythm of occurrence throughout the academic year.

The investigator had an opportunity to witness first-hand a major portion of the year's spectrum of meetings and events, including seasonal activities and those which occur only once each year.

Another advantage associated with the length of time on site that is required in an ethnographic study lay in the high school community's acceptance of the investigator. Gradually, the high school community became accustomed to the presence of the investigator and he became an accepted entity in the school. This provided him an opportunity to establish a high degree of rapport with all subgroups within the school. Respondents appeared to feel at ease with the investigator. This was especially important in interactions between the investigator and students.

During the first two weeks the investigator was on the site, two students casually asked the investigator if he were really a narcotics agent. The investigator carefully explained to these students the nature of his work. Possibly because of this explanation and possibly due to favorable information provided to these students by several Xenon High School graduates who were attending the university at which the investigator taught, this potentially disruptive rumor was discounted. By remaining on site long enough to hear of and discount this rumor, the investigator was able to gain the confidence of these students and many others.

By being on the scene so often the investigator also became accepted by administrators and teachers and was invited to attend faculty meetings, as well as other school functions. Being in the teachers' lounge during planning periods and in the hall or parking lot during student breaks gave the investigator a chance to observe and informally interview in a natural and non-threatening environment. As a result, participants were quite open in their responses and did not appear to feel the pressures that formalized surroundings may have imposed.

Introductions by teachers, students and administrators also aided in in-

interviews with parents in the community. Being seen at various school events, as well as eating at the local cafe on occasion, added credence to the investigator's role and allowed members of the community to feel more at ease when talking to the investigator.

When conversing with each individual for the first time, the investigator attempted to find some common ground in the early stages of the interview. He also gave assistance when it was requested in the school, but he did not provide unsolicited advice or convey an attitude of superiority.

The extended period of interaction allowed the investigator to achieve some insights into respondents' personalities, as well as their biases. This insight helped the investigator as he evaluated responses.

By using ethnographic procedures the investigator was able to study in detail the organization and structure of the student activity program and of individual activities. He also was able to study the program and specific activities from many different points of view.

The examination of participants' reactions in different activities was also possible because of observation methods used in the study. The investigator was able to follow the role of certain "earmarked students"⁵ through their participation in several activities. Comparing and contrasting their behavior in several activities helped the investigator appraise the activity and its participants.

A tremendous advantage in this study lay in the fact that ethnographic methods employed were not disruptive in nature, nor did they call for schedule changes on the part of participants. Administrators were willing and, in many cases, eager to have the investigator observe meetings, classes or almost anything else, as long as the investigator's presence did not "disrupt the classes" or "take teachers away from their work."

Administrators and teachers sometimes fear (and rightfully so) that educational researchers are looking for trouble or have an axe to grind. This misapprehension is seldom relieved by conventional research methods, even after permission to do the research is granted or the data have been gathered. The on-site ethnographic researcher can do much to show his or her open-mindedness and objectivity, setting at ease members of the groups which are being studied.

Disadvantages

Although the time spent on ethnographic techniques leads to a deeper understanding of the school and its subgroups, the long period of data-collection can also be considered a disadvantage. The investigator, who spent some 83 days on site, was allowed the time away from work responsibilities through the generosity of university administrators. This type of arrangement might not be feasible for some investigators, who then would be faced with the problems of insufficient time spent on site and difficulty in scheduling visits to the site at times convenient to the population being studied.

The investigator had hoped to complete this study in less time (50 to 60 days), but found that observation and interviewing of the target groups of participants took much longer than he anticipated.

When observing events such as homecoming, assembly programs or even certain clubs, the investigator had to simply wait until they occurred and make plans to be there. Interviews were held at the convenience of respondents, which caused additional delays.

Another disadvantage lay in the volume of data gathered. Extra work was required in the recording, preparation and typing of protocols, which formed the data base for this study.

The investigator found it much more desirable to make written notes while interviewing or observing rather than using a tape recorder. After attempting to

use a tape recorder on several occasions, the investigator noted that the device proved to be an extremely inhibiting factor for some respondents. For this reason, the use of a tape recorder was completely abandoned early in the study.

Because data were recorded by means of hand-written notes, the investigator was keenly aware of the limits which his writing speed placed upon the quality and comprehensiveness of what was recorded. Many times, valuable bits of information were not recorded. Sometimes these could be recalled by careful review and recollection immediately after the observation or interview. Attempts at recalling lost bits of information, however, were not always successful.

The cost of travel proved to be another limiting factor in this study. Occasionally, traveling 300 miles to and from the site each week led to missing some weekend events simply because attendance would have proven too costly.

A specific disadvantage which the investigator found in planning and carrying out this study was the lack of any form of guidance which might have been provided by previous ethnographic studies on student activities, had any existed. This lack of information from previous studies gave rise to a need for considerable consultation between the investigator and certain members of his research advisory committee. It also meant that certain data gathering methods were tried and, because they did not work well, were abandoned and replaced by others.

In addition, the data which were gathered in this study were not quantifiable. For this reason and because the existence of previous ethnographic studies on student activities could not be found, the investigator sometime found it difficult to analyze and report certain data in narrative form.

Another problem which cost the investigator the opportunity to report a great deal of valuable information was the necessity that respondents' anonymity be preserved. Not only was the school site promised anonymity, but all respondents were also given assurance that no remarks or comments which might be traced

to them would be used. This concession caused much soul-searching for the investigator. It meant that some lengthy and informative case studies were not included in the narrative in any way for fear that if they were reported, readers who are familiar with the school might be able to determine the identity of the respondents in question. There was also the possibility of misinterpreting observations and statement by respondents while recording the data and reporting the results. The investigator tried to keep this to a minimum by asking for restatements on what he considered to be key issues and by establishing concurrence by other observers or participants when possible.

A final area which must be weighed by investigators who are considering such research is the personality of the investigator. Such a study requires that the investigator be as personable, agreeable and even-tempered as possible. For any degree of success this investigator found it necessary to relate to participants in a positive and friendly manner. This may be no trouble for researchers who are naturally gregarious, but it could be a major concern in the case of a rather introverted person.

Changes

If he were given the opportunity to conduct a similar study in the future, the investigator would make several changes in the area of research methodology. Although a longer period of time than originally had been foreseen was expended at the site, the investigator could have used additional time for this study. Results might have been more complete if the investigator had followed the student activity program through the entire school year, from August through May in the case of Xenon High School. (Data collection ended in April.)

All phases of this study would have been easier if the investigator had had the benefit of more formal training in the ethnographic process. The ex-

perience of having completed such a study does not fully make up for such essentials as knowing the best way to record and analyze ethnographic data or the proper procedure for gaining permission to use a site.

In addition, the investigator was hindered to a certain extent by a job as a university instructor. Classes had to be taught, papers graded and student teachers visited. This caused scheduling problems which sometimes led to missing events in student activities. The ideal set of circumstances would have included complete freedom to spend on the site, regardless of the amount of time the study might require.

A last alteration which the investigator has reason to believe would have improved the study would have been the interviewing of more parents from the lower socioeconomic levels. A high degree of difficulty was encountered in making contact with and interviewing parents in this group. For the most part, these were parents of non-participants in student activities.

Summary and Conclusions

The use of ethnography as a tool for research in student activities displayed both advantages and disadvantages. Major advantages included sufficient on-site time for a depth of understanding. The length of time also allowed the researcher a chance to review and analyze information which seemed enigmatic on the surface. Being on hand for almost all activities not only provided first hand information but gradually made the investigator an accepted entity in the school among faculty, administrators and students. Another major advantage in this study was the fact that the methods used were not disruptive to the ongoing routine of the school.

The extensive amount of on site time also presented disadvantages, however. Making arrangements to be away from job and family often proved to be difficult. More time was needed to complete the study than was originally planned. Delays due to problems in scheduling interviews and observing events as they occurred were inevitable. The demands of extensive recording of events and interviews often seemed overwhelming. Keeping hand-written records of interviews and observations also imposed limitations on the amount and quality of the material that was recorded.

Overall, the greatest hindrance in carrying out the study was the lack of guidance in the form of previous ethnographic studies on student activities. The nature of the investigative techniques which were used also precluded the quantification of results. Without this method of summarization it was necessary that all reporting be accomplished in the time-consuming narrative form.

A related problem was encountered through the granting of anonymity to all participants. Any information which might have given clues as to the source was

omitted from the final report.

Considering both the advantages and disadvantages in perspective, the researcher found that ethnographic techniques on the whole were useful in the study of student activities in a small school. If one has the time and knowledge of ethnographic methods, as well as the patience and other necessary personality attributes, much can be gained from using ethnographic techniques to study student activities.

Footnotes

¹Ray G. Rist, "Ethnographic Techniques and the Study of an Urban School," Urban Education 10, No. 1 (1975), 86.

²Xenon is a pseudonym.

³Some 66% of the student body participated in at least one activity.

⁴James Sullivan, "Student Activities in a Small High School: An Ethnographic Study" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Mississippi, 1980), passim.

⁵The investigator attempted to observe key students in different activities. These were the very popular students and those designated by teachers as having leadership potential.

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